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Organs Watch: Possibilities and Perils for Public Anthropology

Roberto Abadie

Recent technological advances in biomedicine have introduced new therapeutic possibilities but have also contributed to the emergence of a global market for human bodies and body parts. For example, artificial modes of human reproduction created a market for eggs, semen, and surrogate wombs. In addition, organ transfer generated a demand for kidneys and half livers. The whole body has become a valuable commodity as professional research subjects venture into the economy of Phase I Clinical Trials, testing drug safety for pharmaceutical companies. In the process, the trade has become a deeply unequal one in which poor, vulnerable, and easily exploited women and men, in the United States and, increasingly, in the global south, exchange their bodies for cash. Yet, these economic transactions are often obscured by buyers—either individuals or corporations— frequently using the language of donation, voluntarism, and “gift” giving.

This unjust and exploitative trade is one that anthropologists have documented and denounced since its inception in the 1990s. Few were more forceful in understanding the forces behind body commodification and in opposing the most abusive aspects of this trade than anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes. As an author, Scheper-Hughes has documented the ideologies, institutions, and social networks behind organ trafficking, one of the most egregious examples of bodily commerce. More than a decade of dedicated ethnographic research has allowed Scheper-Hughes to follow these transactions, leading her to Israel, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, Western Europe, and the United States, among other sites. In Malinowskian fashion, she has uncovered the circulation of organs and other body parts: “In general, the flow of organs, tissues, and body parts follows the modern routes of capital: from South to North, from third to first world, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male bodies,” she writes (Scheper-Hughes 2001). According to Scheper-Hughes, organ trafficking both illuminates

and exacerbates existing social and racial inequalities. For example, a kidney from a Brazilian slum dweller costs 2,000 dollars while a kidney from an Israeli seller can be priced ten times higher (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2004).

Of course, the selling of an organ for transplant purposes is illegal in most countries, but according to Scheper-Hughes, it is conducted regularly with the support of a complex and shady network of buyers, sellers, brokers, surgeons, and medical hospitals. Poor, desperate sellers—sometimes entire families—from Brazilian and Indian slums or Moldovan cities often consent to sell a kidney or other body part as a strategy of survival. Executed Chinese prisoners have their organs removed and integrated into this global trade. Between sellers and buyers stands a group of brokers in charge of “organ procurement” who use cash, promises, deception, and even ties with criminal mafias that also traffic women for sexual work and engage in other illicit trades to get the organs they need. Relatively wealthy Western buyers willing to bypass waiting lists and regulations, as well as rich Middle Eastern, Asian, and Latin American patients, procure coveted organs with the complicity of specialized medical tourism entrepreneurs that offer an available organ—no questions asked—in sometimes exotic or luxurious hospital accommodations set in an otherwise impoverished country. According to Scheper-Hughes, U.S.-based hospitals and surgeons in some cases do not seem to ask many questions about organ provenance either. For Scheper-Hughes, this trade is not only illicit but also unethical, furthering social inequalities while also dehumanizing and endangering organ sellers who are left to fend for themselves after an organ is removed, leaving lifelong social and physical scars.

But her work has not stopped at understanding how organ trafficking works. She has also taken steps to uncover, prevent, and help prosecute it through the Organs Watch program founded with her colleague Lawrence Cohen in 1996. In the absence of an international body, Organs Watch was created as a temporary entity to “explore allegations of ethical and human rights violations in organs procurement and transplant surgery and to make recommendations to the appropriate medical bodies, such as the World Medical association, of strategies that might be used to enforce existing, but ineffectual, international regulations and standards on organs procurement and transplant” (Scheper-Hughes 2001). Among other accomplishments, her work with Organs Watch has alerted the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the existence of a Brooklyn-based illegal organs racket that was successfully prosecuted in 2009.

Perhaps the most interesting and replicable aspect of Scheper-Hughes’s work is the partnership Organs Watch has established with journalists. Scientists and anthropologists have often been wary of collaborating with journalists, fearing that the need for expediency and

catchy headlines would compromise the nuances and complexities involved in scientific inquiry. However, as Scheper-Hughes and Cohen have shown, developing partnerships with journalists is a powerful way of making the results of anthropological research known to larger publics, strengthening the likelihood of shaping public policies. There are a number of ways in which anthropologists could build on the Organs Watch example and strengthen collaborations with journalists. For example, we could set up seminars with investigative journalists about ethnographic methods, not to convert them into improvised anthropologists but to inform them about what we do and how we do it. In turn, journalists could teach us about investigative-reporting techniques like approaching powerful sources, following paper trails, and exposing wrongdoing. It is unfortunate that investigative reporting seems to be on the decline, pressed by an economic crisis that also threatens our work (and jobs) as anthropologists. But if public anthropology is to remain relevant, it will need the continuous effort of committed anthropologists working with a number of actors, from social movements to more unexpected ones, as Organs Watch has shown through its collaboration with both law enforcement and a variety of media that has helped cover and amplify the impact of its work.

Working undercover at times—posing as an organ buyer—to track illegal activities, Scheper-Hughes's ethnographic research has also raised questions about anthropological ethics, our relationship with subjects, and the production of knowledge, pushing disciplinary boundaries while drawing a fair share of criticism. Her work pursuing illegal networks and activities has challenged the conventional working of Institutional Review Boards in particular, with their emphasis on transparency, informed consent, and full disclosure. Undercover anthropology might challenge current ethical assumptions, but it is at times the only way to “study up,” following powerful people and institutions that would not be otherwise accessible. Besides, ethical regulations exist to protect vulnerable research subjects from coercion and harm. No doubt mafioso-like organ brokers, hospitals, and others unsavory characters can protect themselves very well. Although the implications of such research methods demand further discussion and debate, Scheper-Hughes's work is a timely contribution as the market for human bodies and body parts seems to be thriving more than ever, opening new venues of inquiry and action.

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